



VOICES & VISIONS

A publication of the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

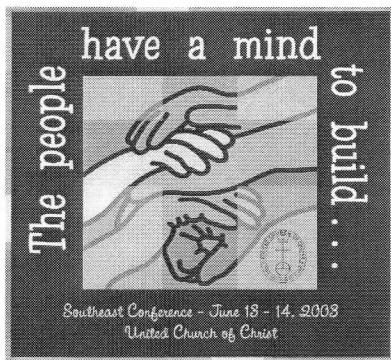
Volume 5, Number 3

Fall 2003

Annual Meeting Filled with Inspiration and Challenge

There was hardly a place left to sit when choirs, delegates and visitors filled the Pilgrim Congregational Church UCC in Chattanooga for the Annual Meeting of the Southeast Conference on June 13-14. With the theme "The People Have a Mind to Build," keynote presenters challenged all attending to consider how they are a part of building the body of Christ.

The event began with an engaging Leadership Convocation on Friday. Dr. John Thomas, President of the United Church of Christ, presented *"What Gift Can We Bring: Why the UCC is an essential dimension of God's mission in our culture, world, and among the ecumenical community."* Thomas creatively shared ways that the United



Bob Harris, President, Christian College of Georgia enjoys conversation with Rev. Bennie Liggins, Associate Conference Minister.



Colorful altar sets an inspiring mood for worship.

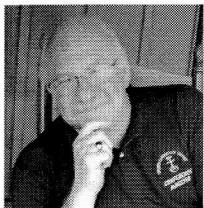
Church of Christ can be a creative voice within our world. An afternoon workshop on Developing Effective Worship and Glorious Praise was led by Rev. Bennie Liggins, Associate Conference Minister; Rev. Vant Hardaway, Pastor of First United Church of Christ in Sweetwater, TN; and Rev. Kathy Clark, Executive Director of the TAP program. Workshop participants explored the essential role of worship and praise in the life of the community and practical steps to planning worship that both praises God and builds up the Body of Christ.

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"I will pour out my Spirit upon all... and your young shall see visions and your old shall dream dreams." Acts 2:17



A Letter from the Conference Minister

THE EMERGING VOCATION OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Dear Friends,

During the Annual Meeting of the Southeast Conference as I listened to the eloquence of our keynoters—Dr. John Thomas, President and General Minister of the UCC; Rev. Joyce Hollyday, Associate Conference Minister, and Dr. Kenneth Samuel—it occurred to me that each presentation addressed facets of the question, “What is the emerging vocation of the United Church of Christ?”

John Thomas invited us, in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, to live with “a touch of daring” in our lives. He called us to be *daring prophets* who will challenge the massive deceptions around us, and called us to be *daring poets* who will tell our story in music, art, and in poetry. As he called on us to live in a spirit of daring, he cautioned us to avoid the dangers of failure of nerve, lack of imagination, and the seduction of respectability.

Our ministry, our call, is to build a church that is radical in both its invitation and its spirit.

While lifting up the glorious history of the AMA in the South, Joyce Hollyday told stories of courage and risk on the part of those teachers and missionaries of New England who came to the South on the heels of the Union troops to build schools and ministries for a recently emancipated people. Through these stories, Joyce invited us to consider again the courage and vision of our spiritual forebears and invited us to live with that same courage and vision in our generation.

Ken Samuel, in a dramatic and moving sermon, threw open the doors of the church, reminding us of God’s promises of

redemption and restoration as gifts available to all people as God’s children. Our ministry, *our call*, is to build a church that is radical in both its invitation and its spirit, with the words of freedom and justice we know in Christ Jesus on its lips at every moment.

The church in which I was trained to serve was a church that called chaplains to minister among the community of faith. We were to help maintain ministries and guide them to function smoothly. We planned programs, encouraged stewardship, and brought thoughtful sermons and a pastoral presence. This was a church, which while it did value its mission, did not have mission at its heart. I believe that John Thomas, Joyce Hollyday, and Ken Samuel are pointing us to the emerging church, the church with a new vocation for a new day. This vocation is one that is marked more by daring and less by respectability, more by mission and less by maintenance. This church does not seek safety in uniformity but takes risks to claim diversity in those it invites to the table. Finally, this church understands that the Gospel of Jesus Christ draws us not only into a personal and vital relationship with Christ but compels us to walk to the cadences of “the drum majors for justice” around us.

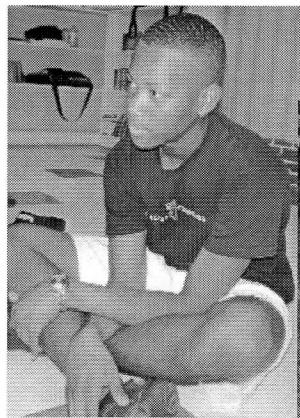
I smile as I look at our gatherings of the Southeast Conference. We travel from rural hamlets and big cities, we are young and old, black and white, gay and straight; we come from a variety of walks of life, giving testimony in our very gathering to the breadth of God’s promises and the full reach of God’s love. This is an exciting time to be the United Church of Christ. This is a wonderful season in which to be another voice, a church of another vocation in the name of Christ in the South.

Peace,
Timothy C. Downs

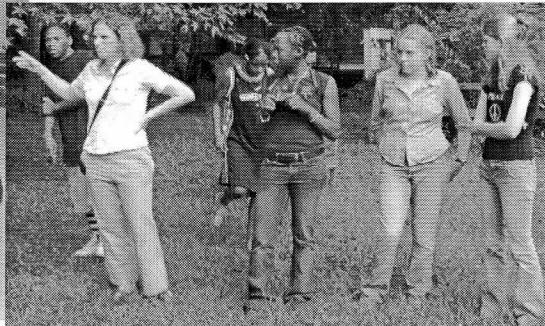
“Grace to you, and peace...”

Annual Meeting

Continued from page 1



Eric Davis, Pilgrim Congregational Church, Chattanooga.



Youth gathered for activities at the Chattanooga Nature Center.

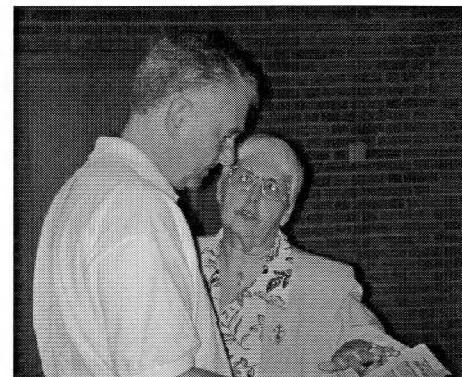
Friday evening worship was led by Rev. Joyce Hollyday, Associate Conference Minister. Her sermon poignantly highlighted the many stories throughout the Southeast Conference where people in numerous settings had a mind to build. From the Old Testament story of Nehemiah 4:6, Hollyday encouraged members throughout the Southeast Conference to consider how we may best fulfill our vision for sharing the work of the gospel in the Southeast, challenging each person and each church to consider what building block they have to contribute. Dr. Kenneth Samuel, Pastor and Founder of Victory Church, Stone Mountain led Saturday's worship in an inspiring call to celebrate that in "God's house there are many mansions," that the vision of God's will for the church is a community where the doors are open and all God's children are welcomed, gathered in, and lifted up.

New Training Under Development for Youth Leaders

We are pleased to announce that the Southeast Conference is working with the people at Candler School of Theology who developed the Youth Theological Initiative to offer lay and ordained adult youth leaders extended training in youth leadership. Planning for this program is underway and details should be unveiled soon. Please watch for more information in the next newsletter and in the pastoral e-mail. For more information contact Betsy Flory at bflory@secucc.org or call 404-607-1993.

Wonderful music was a thread throughout the conference through the gifts shared by Fred Childer, organist at Central Congregational Church Atlanta, a choir from Victory Church in Stone Mountain, GA, and the youth choir from First UCC, Sweetwater Tennessee. During annual meeting sessions, youth also met for activity and study together.

Additional workshops included a presentation for youth leaders, led by Betsy Flory, Southeast Conference Director of Youth Ministries, and training for Disaster Relief Coordinators, led by Will Rabert, Disaster Relief Coordinator.



Dr. John Thomas, President of the United Church of Christ, talks with Joyce Myers-Brown.

From the ice cream social to opportunities to view valuable resources in the display area, annual meeting attendees were able to meet new friends and learn about new opportunities for their local churches.

VOICES & VISIONS

A publication of the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

The mission of Voices & Vision is to promote current events and conference news, offering information and inspiration to members.

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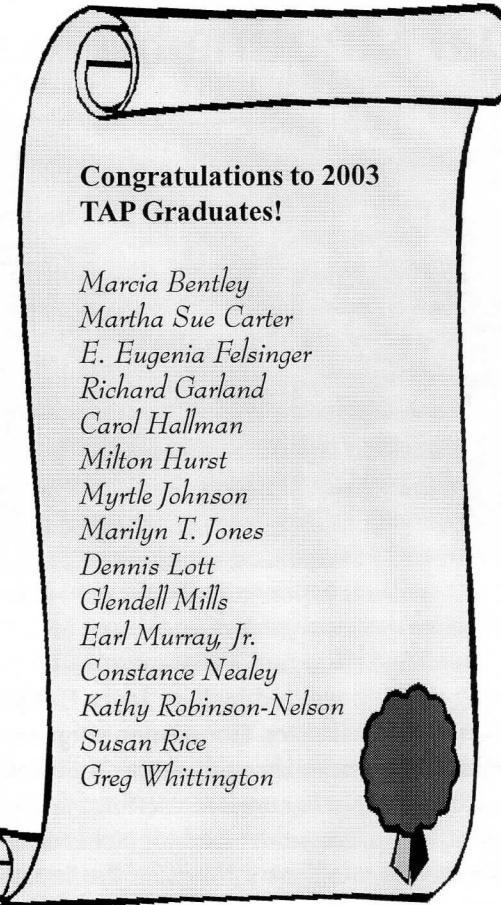
First TAP Graduates Honored at Annual Meeting

By Kathy Clark

They came from the clay hills of Tennessee, the piney woods of Alabama, the Carolina low country, across the muddy waters of the Chattahoochee, from small towns and big cities. Fifteen individuals, all of whom engaged in biblical study, theological reflection, and practice in the arts of ministry in their local settings for the last three and one-half years, gathered together with friends and family on Thursday, June 12th, 2003 at Pilgrim Church in Chattanooga to celebrate their graduation from the Theology Among the People (TAP) Program.

Rev. Dr. John Thomas, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, offered reflections on the nature of ministry in the UCC and conferred Certificates of Completion during a prayer service, proclaiming to the graduates that "the Church is made stronger and wiser by the living example of your faithfulness." Rev. Dr. Dick Sales, retiring founder of the TAP program, who himself was honored that evening, presented each graduate with a cross as a symbol of their accomplishment and a reminder that "God calls the whole church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ." Among the fifteen graduates were three members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) who participated in TAP groups in Alabama. Rev. Dr. Bob Harris, President of the Christian College of Georgia, was also present for the celebration.

Kathy Clark is Associate Conference Minister of the Southeast Conference and Director of the Theology Among the People (TAP) program. She may be contacted at kclark@secucc.org.



TAP: A Resource for Your Congregation

TAP is an ecumenical program of the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ that brings theology into the midst of the people of God to equip them for the work of ministry and the building up of the Body of Christ. TAP participants commit to a three and one-half year process, meeting in small groups in local settings, and gathering periodically for large group convocations throughout the conference. For information about forming a TAP group in your congregation, please contact the Director of the TAP Program, Kathy Clark at kclark@secucc.org or call 404/607-1993.

Conference Youth Build Homes in Juarez, Mexico

By Betsy Flory and Conference Youth

This summer, 12 youth and five adults from four Southeast Conference churches traveled to Juarez, Mexico on July 19-27, 2003 to build a house for a family. As part of the Conference youth ministries immersion programs, youth on mission to Juarez experienced "the Whole Body of Christ" and how we are connected by our common faith to people who are ordinarily hidden to us. In four days time, we cleared, leveled, poured, framed, roofed, stuccoed and wired a tiny but solid house in a settlement of cardboard huts on top of a garbage dump. Even more important, we came to love those we served – Lupe and



The best part of the trip was Lupe's face when we dedicated the house. For us it was a week in the heat doing hard work we didn't know how to do. For her it was a miracle.



her children who received the house, Lupe's grandmother who prayed until the house was a reality, the Pastor who nominated Lupe for the program, and all the neighbors who watched and cheered us on as we did hard, sweaty, frustrating construction work we didn't know how to do in mind-boggling heat. I would hazard to say it was the hardest thing any of us has ever done, but absolutely the most rewarding. When asked if they wanted to do it again, every young person and adult in the group said an enthusiastic "Yes!" The following reflections were written as part of worship on July 25, 2003 in Juarez, Mexico.

This trip was an incredible learning experience for me. I think I received a lot more than the family we were building the house for. I'm glad we got to actually interact with the family rather than just building a house for some random family because it meant a lot more this way.



There was excitement and anticipation on the journey across five states. Astonishment hit us as we encountered the incredulous conditions our family lived in. Frustration taunted us as we learned construction methods through trial and error. We experienced unfamiliar physical strength and endurance as we put in 13 hours of manual labor daily. We were overcome with emotion at the dedication of the home. And finally, we were blessed with the physical presence of God evident in the family we built for.



This trip opened my eyes to other ways of living and made me see that God's love is what makes one truly happy and that material possessions aren't as important as our society would like them to be. The trip made my faith stronger and helped me confirm my faith.



Southeast Conference Attendees Reflect on General Synod XXIV

The Southeast Conference was represented by three delegates and numerous additional attendees at the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, held July 11-15 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Attendees witnessed the powerful expression of the growth of the UCC through the introduction of 74 new church starts and exposure to many varied resolutions and mission endeavors. The writings below include the reflections of several who attended. Others attending included Tim Downs, Conference Minister; Gerri Ryons-Hudson, Administrative Assistant for the Conference; Kathy Clark, Executive Director of the TAP Program, and Joyce Hollyday, Associate Conference Minister .

I have one word for General Synod 24 – *awesome!* Awesome city - Minneapolis was great. Awesome worship – Rev. Yvette Flunder and Rev. Lillian Daniels were superb, with informative and inspiring sermons— awesome music and awesome hospitality. The Minnesota Conference made us feel like special guests. I left this synod feeling very proud of my membership in the United Church of Christ. No one could attend the planned activities and not understand this church’s commitment to honor Christ’s call to make room at the table for the least of them. We are blessed with the opportunity to serve as host for General Synod 25 in Atlanta, Georgia in 2005. Do not miss it - as good as 24 was, 25 promises to even be better.

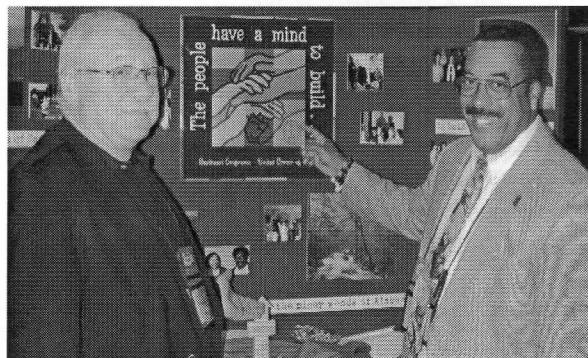
*Bennie Liggins
Community Congregational Church, Montgomery, AL*

If I were to write a title for this reflection on General Synod 24, I think it would be "MY First General



Southeast Conference attendees gathered for lunch and conversation together.

Synod". Although Nancy and I have attended several General Synods, I was never asked to be a delegate before. For this very responsible task, you hear the whole debate



*Conference Minister, Tim Downs greets
Southern Conference Minister, Steve Camp.*

on each measure to be voted on and are a part of the process, sometimes surprising yourself with your diligence. Looking back on the experience, I'm glad nothing really dramatic happened, for it takes some experience to do the job well. There were no departures of delegations, no open hostility on the floor. I was there in the position of a neophyte. When the question of holding General Synod only every four years came up, I voted to keep it every two years and seek funding adequate to the need, so that delegates will always have two chances to attend, and because we need more folk to learn the important work of General Synod. Thanks to all who make General Synod what it is.

*Dick Sales
First Congregational Church, Birmingham, AL*

I love Synod because I love the United Church of Christ, but this Synod was extra special for me because for the first time I was a delegate and was totally involved, from a delegation meeting in the early morning through worship late at night. The theme of Synod was "God is Still Speaking," and indeed God is still speaking. Thanks to the UCC, we believe God is at work in our lives, in the life of our church, and in the world. The Synod logo was the shape of a comma and held an image of God embracing the world and all its people in love and concern. I was privileged to hear rich celebrations of UCC ministries, including 74 new churches, and gain inspiration through rich worship, and many workshops and exhibits.

*Joyce Myers-Brown
Central Congregational Church, Atlanta, GA*

As a delegate to General Synod, I worked hard! I attended all the plenary sessions, and since I had to represent the

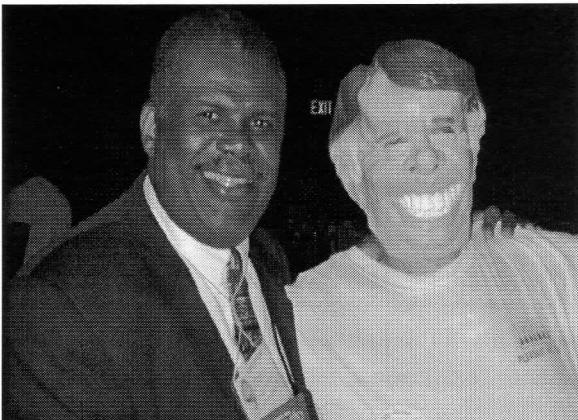
Southeast Conference with my vote, I read every resolution so I could vote intelligently and faithfully. I chaired the committee that made recommendations on the resolutions dealing with transgendered people. This was a transforming experience for me. I had never really thought about what a transgendered person was or faces in daily life. Our committee came away knowing that transgendered people are children of God, just like the rest of us. And they need the welcoming support of the church, just like the rest of us. General Synod is a wonderful way for members to fully appreciate the work of the UCC, as well as experiencing the diversity of people, ideas and worship of our church family.

• •

Lisa Alston

First Congregational Church, Atlanta, GA

I came from Synod (my first one) with two new pieces of insight into the United Church of Christ. The first is that as a denomination we seem more willing than most to do what feels uncomfortable or requires a stretch of our minds and hearts in the service of the gospel. I sat in on a discussion about a proposal for the denomination to begin considering the ethical consequences of our food choices. In heated discussion, people's lifestyles and livelihoods were being scrutinized and they didn't like it. To my surprise the committee, rather than killing the proposal, decided to refer it to Executive Committee for further study and better organization. Apparently they knew the

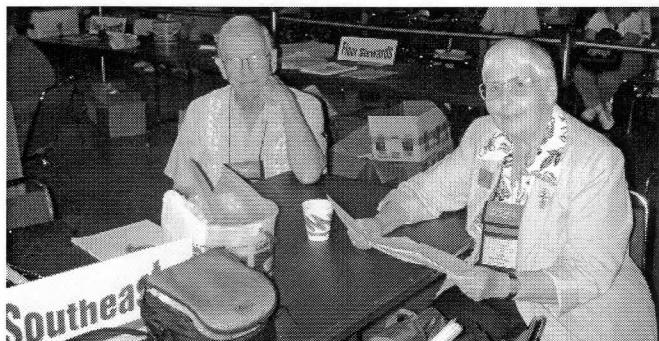


Rev. Bennie Liggins and a Jimmy Carter look alike invite Synod attendees to Atlanta for General Synod XXV in July 2005.

heat generated by the discussion signaled the need for more thought about the topic. I was heartened that we can tackle tough subjects, even if they hit us close to home.

The second thing I learned about the UCC was that our resolutions don't stop inside the denomination. I sat in on the committee which proposed a resolution against corporate greed and made recommendations about ways to safeguard against that greed. After some discussion and rewording the proposal was passed. I was surprised to learn that the Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) has a process for hearing and acting on public complaint. If a resolution from a non-government entity such as the UCC meets the criteria for action laid out by the SEC regulations, the SEC must make a public effort to act on the resolution. I was surprised to learn that it is the intent of the UCC to meet these criteria and to get the SEC to act to control corporate greed that allows CEO's to raid retirement funds and deprive employees of work while padding extravagant "parachutes" for their management. That's a pretty counter-cultural, subversive thing for the institutional church to do. Amen!

*Betsy Taylor Flory
Open Community Church, Atlanta, GA*



Dick Sales and Joyce Myers-Brown enjoy a break from their busy schedules as delegates.

More on General Synod

Included in the web site version of this article at www.secucc.org is a link to the national UCC site containing numerous stories and photographs of General Synod XXIV. You will find various complete synod addresses, including the address by General Minister and President, Dr. John Thomas, entitled "Imagine – A Tale of Two Ships." Several presentations are available in print as well as in audio. You will also find an overview of Synod in a video format.

Brookmeade Congregation Celebrates Anniversaries

by MaryLou Knupp and Willard Faulkner

Brookmeade Congregational Church, UCC, in Nashville, TN celebrated 75 years since its founding as the former Collegeside Congregational Church and also celebrated 20 years of the pastorate of its retiring minister, Rev. Dan Rosemerry. Collegeside was formally organized in 1928 when a number of local Congregationalists assembled to establish a "liberal Christian voice" in Nashville. After a quarter century, this church, with the support of the Southeast Conference, looked for a new location, and in 1953 Brookmeade was organized at its present location. Though small in numbers, the church became known for its openness. In the 1950s, Brookmeade spoke out against racial segregation and some members joined the Nashville lunch counter sit-ins. Author and minister, Will Campbell, once spoke of Brookmeade as "the conscience of Nashville."

In April, Brookmeaders celebrated Rosemerry's 20 years of ministry at Brookmeade with a catered dinner, gifts, and an evening of music performed by friends and members of Brookmeade. During Dan's tenure, the congregation continued to be active in the Nashville community and became an open and affirming and a just peace church. Celebrating the theme, *"The past, present, and future church,"* in a yearlong series of anniversary events have included an opening potluck with charter member speakers, a women's service featuring the book *Friendship Cake* by Lynne Hinton, and a lecture entitled *A Once and Future Faith* by David Buttrick, the Drucilla Moore Buffington professor emeritus of homiletics and liturgics at Vanderbilt Divinity School.



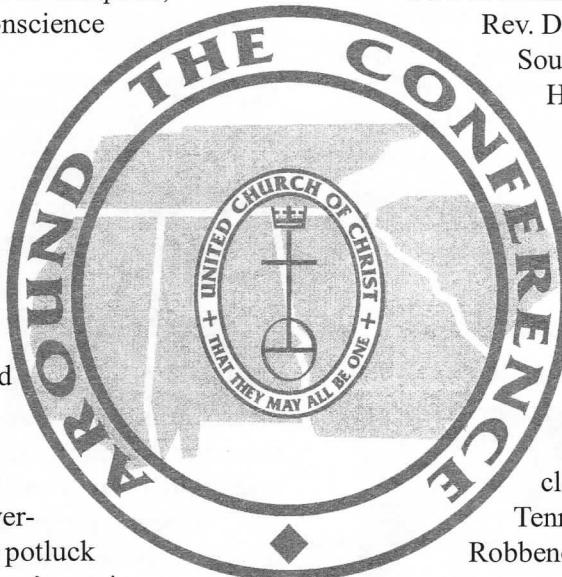
Brookmeade Women of the Church celebrate 75 years of the church's ministry.

The celebration will culminate in a Celebration for Brookmeaders Past and Present, a weekend event on November 7-9 including former pastors.

Brookmeaders are celebrating their church's past, present, and future. Twenty-five years ago, Brookmeade's then pastor, Stephen Gray, wrote, "I think it is fair to say that Brookmeade looks to the future. With no assurance of success, we look forward to labor that God's peace might be made manifest among all people. And by *peace*, we mean—in the words of Frederick Buechner—"not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love."

ALA-TENN Association Meets

The Alabama-Tennessee Association held its 38th Annual Meeting on May 2-3 at First Congregational Christian UCC in Montgomery, AL. On Friday evening, the Rev. Dorothy Gager, vice-moderator of the Southeast Conference and member of Howard Congregational UCC in Nashville, served as liturgist. Preaching was the Rev. Gary Myers, pastor of Trinity Congregational UCC in Athens, AL. The service raised over \$400 for the summer tutorial program for Montgomery-area underprivileged children. Saturday morning Bible Study offered a new perspective on John 4, provided by a clergy couple from Pleasant Hill, Tenn., the Revs. Roger and Patricia Robbenolt, known for superb storytelling.



While meeting, the group approved revisions to its Constitution and By-laws and passed a resolution brought by the Christian Social Justice Committee, chaired by Don Clark of Pleasant Hill, which endorses the National Council of Churches' Oikocredit loan program to aid worker cooperatives in developing nations. The association welcomed its new leaders who were installed by Conference Minister Tim Downs - Moderator: Vanessa Robbs of Pilgrim Congregational UCC in Chattanooga; Vice-moderator: Vant Hardaway, pastor of First United Church of Christ, Sweetwater, TN.; Secretary: Mike Stroud of United Church, Huntsville, AL. Kathryn Robinson of First Congregational Christian UCC in Birmingham continues as treasurer. Superb hospitality and delicious meals were offered by the Rev. Michael Garrett and members of First Congregational Christian Church.

CONFERENCE

Concerns & Celebrations

• *Kwan Hae Chi*, the former pastor of Open Community UCC, a Korean congregation in Atlanta, was called to serve a congregation in Seoul, Korea beginning in December.

• *John Sumner*, former pastor of First United Church of Christ in Belvedere, TN, begins in October as the pastor of St. Peter's UCC in Coupland TX.

• *Joe Ingle*, Director of Neighborhood Justice Center in Nashville and a UCC minister, received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. Joe is a member of Brookmeade Congregational Church, UCC, in Nashville.

• *Michael Barbaro* was received as a student in care of the GA/SC Association. Michael is a teacher and chaplain at Westminster School in Atlanta and a member of Central Congregational Church, UCC in Atlanta.

• *Toby Sanders*, a recent graduate from Princeton Theological Seminary, was approved by the GA/SC Association for ordination pending a call. Toby is a member of GSN Ministries, UCC and is looking forward to doing a new church start in Atlanta.

• *Tom Johnson* was licensed for ministry by the GA/SC Association and was installed as pastor of Midway Congregational Church UCC in Midway, GA in a service on October 12th.

• *Allen Mullinax*, Minister of Music at Virginia-Highland Church in Atlanta, was granted full ordained ministerial standing in the UCC.

• *Brenda Green*, Coordinator of Chaplaincy Services at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta at Scottish Rite, was granted Ecclesiastical Endorsement by the GA/SC Association. Brenda is a member of Central Congregational UCC.

• Dorothea Lotze-Kola and Lewis Kola celebrated the birth of twin daughters, Grace Oluremi Oyekola and Rachel Olusade Oyekola, born on August 12th. Dorothea is a Chaplain at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta at Scottish Rite.

• *Karl Whiteman*, former pastor of First United Church of Christ, Belvedere, will be installed as pastor of Faith United Church, UCC, in Tamarac, FL on October 23rd.

• *Susan Mitchell* was ordained at a service of worship at First Congregational Church, UCC in Atlanta on Friday, October 3rd. She is called to develop a new church start in Southwest Atlanta - the Sankofa United Church of Christ.

• *James Metzger*, a Ph.D. candidate at Vanderbilt Divinity School and a member of First United Church of Christ in Nashville, was approved by the Ala-Tenn Association for ordination pending a call.

New Scholarship Fund Honors TAP Missionary

The 2003 Annual Meeting of the Southeast Conference was a time of great celebration. The Thursday night Convocation was not only a time to celebrate the accomplishments of the first graduates of the Theology Among the People (TAP) Program, but was also a time to recognize and honor the contributions of the beloved founder of the TAP program, Rev. Dr. Dick Sales. Rev. Dr. John Thomas, President and General Minister of the United Church of Christ, and Rev. Dr. Timothy Downs, Conference Minister of the Southeast Conference, spoke words of appreciation for Rev. Sales' 30 plus years of ministry in the field of Theological Education by Extension. Among the gifts conferred to Rev. Sales upon his retirement from the staff of the Southeast Conference, it was announced that a scholarship has been established in his name. The Richard W. Sales Scholarship Fund for Lay Theologians will insure that Dr. Sales' legacy, which spanned continents, will also span generations. Generous contributions to the fund through the offering taken during the Saturday worship service of the Annual Meeting amounted to more than \$1200.00. These funds will be used to provide scholarships to TAP participants so that Dr. Sales' vision of accessibility to the program by any who wish to participate, regardless of their ability to pay, will continue.



Contributions to the Richard W. Sales Scholarship Fund are welcome. For additional information please contact Kathy Clark, Director of the TAP Program, at kclark@secucc.org or call 404/607-1993.

Two Tennesseans Receive National Awards

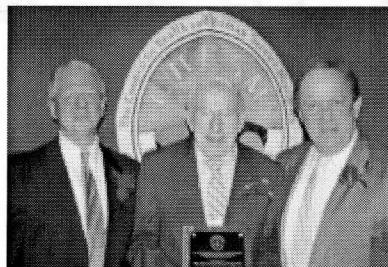
This year, the Council for Health and Human Service Ministries (CHHSM) of the United Church of Christ honored two persons from the Uplands Retirement Village in Pleasant Hill, Tennessee.

Sherry McCloud, LPN in Uplands Health Care Services Department, received the 2003 St. Stephens Award which honors one's commitment to exemplary excellence in performing responsibilities, creativity displayed in performing responsibilities, unusual compassion to persons serviced by his/her ministry, and impact on the organization's overall quality and commitment to Christian service. Sherry currently works as a nurse in Uplands Home Health Services nurses. Residents who benefit from



Sherry's care unanimously report her to be there when they need her, pleasant and competent. Many shared how Sherry had been observant and alerted the residents to potential health problems before situations became critical.

Joseph Gyorke, a resident Member of Uplands Retirement Village, received the Towel & Basin Award, a national honor for one who demonstrates commitment to his/her efforts as a Christian service and personal ministry, exemplary service to staff, residents and/



or clients, creativity in performing tasks, and impact on the organization's overall quality and Christian service. The name of "towel and basin" is based on traditional Christian symbols of

service. At Pleasant Hill Elementary School, "Mr. Joe" unofficially coordinates the volunteer program, and volunteers himself in classrooms every week. At Wharton Nursing Home, Joe conducts a weekly Bible class, leads a hymn sing, occupies the Reception desk, and assists with worship. Joe has served on almost every committee of the Pleasant Hill Community Church, United Church of Christ.

Uplands Retirement Village is a continuum of care community of about 300 members, providing services for independent living in houses, condos, and apartments, assisted care in Fletcher House, and managing Wharton Nursing Home, which provides resident care for the surrounding community. Uplands is a member of CHHSM, a national association which includes 356 service facilities and programs operated by 85 corporations, all with ties to the United Church of Christ and located throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

Conference Calendar

November

31-1	Board of Director's Meeting , Central Congregational Church, Atlanta, GA
14	ALA/TEN Church & Ministry Committee Meeting , Pilgrim Congregational Church, Chattanooga, TN
15	GA/SC Church & Ministry Committee Meeting , Central Congregational Church, Atlanta, GA
21	Personnel Committee Meeting , Conference Office, Atlanta, GA
24	Annual Meeting Planning Committee Meeting , Piedmont College, Demorest, GA
27-28	Thanksgiving Holiday , Conference Office Closed

December

25	Christmas Day , Conference Office Closed
24-5	Holidays , Conference Office Closed

Southeast Feast

Food for the Heart and Soul

By Joyce Hollyday



The People Had a Mind to Build

This article is adapted from the opening worship sermon delivered at the Southeast Conference Annual Meeting on July 12, 2003.

The Israelites were people on a long, difficult journey. They began as nomads; then were relentlessly oppressed as slaves doing hard labor in Egypt, building cities for the Pharaoh. Their liberation was followed by forty years of wandering in barren, rocky wilderness. Then, finally, they made it to the long-awaited promised land. They built the temple and city of Jerusalem, their pride and hope and joy. But they weren't destined to live happily ever after there. They were eventually driven out of what had become their homeland and forced into exile, their city destroyed. At last, they were given the opportunity to return home. Think of the joy of refugees streaming back to familiar places—places that hold their most cherished memories and history. But consider also the wound of seeing all that you hold dear in ruins—laid waste to rubble, scorched by fire.

Nehemiah, a man with a bold vision, saw destruction all around but led the Israelites to a vision for something different. *"So we rebuilt the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height; for the people had a mind to build."* (Neh. 4:6) Like the early Israelites, we are on a journey. The question for us is, "Do we have a mind to build?" Are we ready to be courageous in our vision and generous in our gifts of time and talent, of prayer and money?

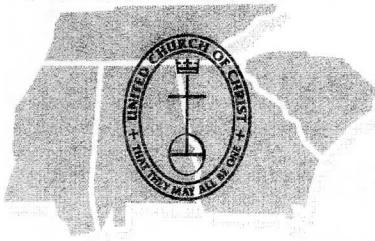
The journey of being God's people is always a little scary, a little risky. The mockers will surely come. If we commit ourselves in this moment to live by gospel values—to proclaim peace in the face of war, and simplicity in the midst of overwhelming materialism, and justice in the midst of overwhelming exploitation, and inclusion in the midst of hatred—they will surely come. They'll tell us that we're feeble, or unpatriotic; or, as the Israelites were told, that a fox could knock over the wall of Jerusalem they were trying to build.

It's important for us to remember that the Israelites rebuilt the city one brick at a time. And they didn't do it overnight. Nehemiah kept his vision to himself for a while because he knew the enormity of the task he was going to request of the people. Bricks are heavy. The people knew this needed to be a community effort—no one could rebuild the wall alone. They were in it for the common good, and they had a mind to build.

Penny Lernoux was a journalist who was transformed by the struggle of the poor in Latin America. In the closing words of her last book, she quoted a young Guatemalan peasant woman. The words were a reflection on the gospel mandate to lay down our lives, offered a few months before this woman was killed by the Guatemalan military. "What good is life," she said, "unless you give it away?—unless you can give it for a better world, even if you never see that world but have only carried your grain of sand to the building site. Then you're fulfilled as a person." What is the grain of sand that you bring? What is the brick that your congregation is creating out of its many grains of sand? What is the structure that we together in the Southeast Conference are building out of our rich variety of bricks?

Renowned Civil Rights historian Dr. Vincent Harding has said, "Living in faith is knowing that even though our little work, our little seed, our little brick may not make the whole thing, the whole thing exists in the mind of God, and that whether or not we are there to see the whole thing is not the most important matter. The most important thing is whether we have entered the process."

I believe the people of the Southeast Conference have a mind to build. We've joined that long stream of faithfulness that began when a people claimed a homeland and built a city. And then rebuilt that city. As we are called to build up our little corner of the realm of God. And I issue this invitation and challenge. With Christ as the cornerstone, with love as the foundation, with hope as the cement—may we step forward, boldly, each of us with our little grain of sand, with our little brick—and place it into the wall of faithfulness.



MANY VOICES, ONE IN CHRIST

***Southeast Conference of the
United Church of Christ***

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*But we have this treasure
in earthen vessels, that
the surpassing greatness
of the power may be of
God and not from our-
selves.*

II Corinthians 4:7



*Great are your thoughts, O God,
By which we've fully known.
You search our paths
and see our ways.
And call us as your own.*

*Before we drew a breath
Our times were in your hands.
Wonderful are your works, O God,
and fair are your demands.*

*These words are taken from a hymn, "Great
are Your Thoughts,"
by Lavon Baylor in *Led by Love*,
United Church Press, 1996*